

# AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN WARTIME CONCENTRATION CAMPS

This afternoon I feel honored to speak, as a fellow citizen, about an American experience of World War II, unique in our lifetime and in this country, when about 120,000 Japanese Americans and their parents were removed from their homes on the West Coast and placed in concentration camps. Books are now being written about this episode which lasted almost four years. But rather than discuss the historical and legal ramifications of our imprisonment, I should like to simply describe for you what happened to my family and me.

A sonnet I wrote many years ago will serve as preface:

## Verdict

Guilt by heredity presumed enough  
For accusation and the summary.  
The verdict but sustained unreasoned proof  
Against our suspect group, as history  
Rewrote itself, and this bewildered land  
Acted to rid the yellow stain from sight  
Without regard or wish to understand  
That being born here granted human right.

No protest could defend, when slant of eyes,  
The very face and black hair marked, as well  
As any badge, our racial origin.  
How many others did the strong despise  
And persecute, who yet survived to tell  
Of judgment based on color of the skin?

So now let me take you back in time. At 7:55 a.m., Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, the United States Naval Station, Pearl Harbor, on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, was attacked by Japanese aircraft. At that hour, I was giving my little son, not quite three months old, his morning feeding, and I had just turned on the radio. I was stunned by the grim news. My immediate thought was how we Japanese living in this country would be affected. I soon learned. All Japanese funds were frozen; credit became difficult. By that night I found that I could not even buy milk at the corner grocery store where I had been shopping for months. Merchants refused to sell to the Japanese Americans, because they felt that they

would then be trading with "the enemy."

In the panicky weeks after Pearl Harbor, feelings against the Japanese ran high. The U.S. Attorney General reported numerous instances of crime and brutality against the Japanese on the West Coast between December, 1941 and March, 1942. Immediately with the beginning of the war, the Department of Justice, through the Federal Bureau of Investigation, had arrested registered enemy agents and persons known to have hostile intent. Repeated investigations and arrests occurred wherever and whenever there were suspicions, and we were in constant fear of unexpected FBI raids. About this time my brother Roy enlisted in the United States Army.

From January, 1942, on, we felt tension against the Japanese mount, as organized interests, politicians and the press inflamed public opinion. General DeWitt stressed the need for searches and arrests, including those of citizens, without warrants. The distinction between citizens and aliens was ignored, as we all became more and more identified with the enemy. Even old college friends asked me not to call, visit or write to them, though many remained kind and true through the difficult years that followed. We were placed under curfew and had to be off the streets between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m., so errands and marketing were restricted. With each day public temper became even more spiteful and virulent.

The Western Defense Command had been established on December 11, 1941, and the West Coast declared a theater of war, with General DeWitt as military commander. By the end of January, the prospects for tolerant or even moderate treatment of Japanese Americans had disappeared. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Executive Order 9066, authorizing the War Department to set up military areas and to exclude any or all persons from these areas. The next day this responsibility was delegated to General DeWitt. Thus our exclusion became official. Of the Japanese who were evacuated and interned, some 70,000 were the Nisei, the second generation, born citizens. The others were their

parents, the Issei, the first generation, ineligible for citizenship.

No one knew when our evacuation order would be issued. We all were uncertain as to what to do, how to make preparations and when. But by a series of 108 separate proclamations, DeWitt ordered all Japanese removed from the West Coast, which included the states of Washington, Oregon, and California, and a portion of Arizona. By August 7, 1942, the three West Coast states had been cleared of Japanese residents. The explanation given at that time for the mass evacuation was that of military necessity, despite the contrary views of the FBI, the Naval Intelligence and officials in Hawaii.

Since no preparation had been made for so huge a mass exodus, except for Manzanar in California, fairgrounds and racetracks were put to use as temporary assembly centers, and there were 18 of these. In these places Army engineers constructed primitive barracks as temporary quarters for thousands of people.

With others living in the San Francisco Bay region, my family was sent from Berkeley to the Tanforan Race Track in San Bruno, south of San Francisco. In Berkeley the larger families were moved out first, so we were among them. The order of evacuation was kept secret "so that information would not reach any affected person within the area". Once announced each evacuation plan gave seven days from the date of posting of the order until the removal.

We were told that on departure we must carry with us the following: Bedding and linens (no mattress) for each member of the family; toilet articles; extra clothing; sufficient knives, forks, spoons, plates, bowls and cups; and essential personal effects. The catch was that the size and number of packages were limited to that which could be carried by the individual or family group. The hurried preparations exacted tremendous sacrifices, from liquidation of property, farms, crops already planted, shops, to abandoning or destroying cherished possessions, and opportunists took advantage of the bewildered Japanese. Even our family, with so little, found strangers entering our house, as we were packing, to look

for bargains. My mother sold the kitchen stove and the dining table for five dollars. By the time we packed extra sweaters in the suitcases, there was little space except for the most necessary items. Because of my infant, I packed a duffle bag full of diapers and baby clothing. I could not have carried it, along with a suitcase and the baby, except for the fact that a brother had offered to carry it.

The morning of our departure from Berkeley, a sunny April day, we gathered at a church, surrounded by military sentries standing guard with drawn bayonets. We were then taken by chartered buses, under military guard to the Tanforan Race Track across the bay. How strange it was to see that barbed-wire enclosure, with sentry-boxes at intervals, and realize that we were no longer free. At the intake station under the grandstand, the men and boys were searched from head to feet for contraband, and my father had his pocket-knife confiscated. Our family, now to be known by the family number of 13423, and not by our surname, was assigned to horse-stalls in one corner of the race track. The size of our family seemed to be of concern to the housing staff, but with twelve members we were allowed to have two horse-stalls.

Here at the race track, we were introduced to communal living -- eating in a mess-hall, bathing in doorless bath stalls and shower cubicles, answering to a roll-call in the morning and evening, and being under the surveillance of Caucasian camp police. The lack of privacy disturbed us all, and not having the conveniences of running water or bathrooms within the barracks. The entire center was closely guarded, and searchlights played around the camp at night. One evening a Caucasian policeman saw my mother reading in Japanese, so he took her book away. Within a few days it was returned to her, without comment, because it her Japanese Bible.

Churches -- Protestant, Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, and Buddhist -- were established early to bolster the morale of the people. Another support to morale was the opportunity to work, and the wages were set at \$8.00 a month for

the unskilled, \$12.00 for the skilled, and \$16.00 for the professionals. Subsequently, in the permanent camps, the salary scale was increased to \$12.00, \$16.00 and \$19.00 for these categories. In addition, a clothing allowance of \$3.75 was issued to each worker. Later a school was started in the open space under the grandstand, and I taught English in the makeshift high school.

One incident I remember most vividly at Tanforan was the first assembly held for the high school students. On that May morning, the students were seated in one section of the grandstand outside, and we teachers were on the bottom row. Because it was our first assembly, an odd solemnity invested the occasion, as the youthful principal stepped to the borrowed microphone and began speaking. He introduced the teaching staff, graduates of the bay region universities. The University of California graduates were called upon first, then those from Stanford University. As the first Stanford graduate was called upon, unexpected applause and cheering broke out from the student body, and the uproar continued for the second and third Stanfordite. The universities were much-touted rivals during the football season, like the Ohio State University and Michigan, but in this instance the Stanfordites were in the minority, so the students, American-fashion, rooted enthusiastically for the few they felt needed encouragement.

When the assembly ended, the students were asked to return quietly to their classes. They stood up, about five hundred of them, almost as one. Then they began to sing. Who hummed the first note? Who nudged the other to continue? But the melody and the words of "God Bless America" floated out into the air, over the heads of the teachers who had turned to look up at these uprooted ones, and out over the race track and the barbed-wire fence. It was a moving benediction for the country of their birth that had denied them.

Rumors began to seep through the assembly center in August that we would be moved again to a permanent camp in Utah. Ten such concentration camps were built from California to Arkansas, and managed under a civilian agency, named

the War Relocation Agency. Bulletins began to appear on how to prepare for the second move, but no one knew till September how the relocation would be implemented. Again there were the stir and unrest of preparations, packing and crating. Two days before departure everything had to be inspected by the Army, tagged and made ready for pickup.

The first group that left for Utah was the advance work force of more than two hundred volunteers to prepare for the induction of those to follow. Among them was my brother Bill, a bacteriologist, on the sanitary engineering crew. The rest of the family was sent to Utah on a rickety, old train the beginning of October, and from the train-stop in Delta, 17 miles away from the camp, on a bus. On arrival at our destination we were greeted by Bill and a small band of Boy Scouts tooting their horns in the dusty heat. Their banner, held overhead, read: "Welcome to Topaz, the Jewel of the Desert!"

Though we had grown accustomed to the sight of barracks in Tanforan, the new camp was a desolate scene, where hundreds of identical, black tar-papered buildings squatted in rows, block after block. The camp contained 42 city blocks in an area one square mile in extent, guarded by barbed-wire fence and sentry-posts and an encampment of military police. All residential blocks looked alike, and people would get lost all the time. Each block consisted of 14 resident barracks, made to standard Army measurements, 24 feet wide and 96 feet long, partitioned into rooms, with the smallest rooms at the end of the building for couples, and the larger rooms in the middle for family units. Because of the size of our family we were permitted to have two center rooms, but in order to go from one room to the other, one had to go outside and then enter the other room. With only army cots in the rooms, we again resorted to making furniture out of scrap lumber. Eventually, through ingenious ways, the bare rooms acquired a more home-like atmosphere.

In each block the 14 barracks, or apartment houses, were arranged in two rows with an alley between. In this alley were located the latrine building that



housed the shower and bath stalls, lavatories, and laundry tubs, and the mess-hall. To eat in the mess-hall, one had to show an identification card issued for his block's dining hall. The food, allotted at the cost of 39 cents per person each day, allowed no great variation. Milk was given, with a hospital permit, to only babies, the very old and the ill. There was no running water in the barracks, so if one needed drinking water, one had to remember to bring water back from the latrine building to one's room. The need to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night in winter, when snow was knee-deep outside, was, I thought, enough to try one's soul! Since Topaz was 4,650 feet above sea level, the winters tended to be very cold and long, as the snows began early in autumn and sometimes into the month of May. One year the Easter egg-hunt was held, with little children digging excitedly in deep snow for colored, boiled eggs, which were well iced. Dust storms were always prevalent, and a stiff wind could stir up a blinding dust storm which blotted out adjacent buildings just two paces away and turn the rooms murky and all the contents within a gritty gray. We often ate sandy food and drank sandy tea.

There were about 8,500 of us in Topaz, mainly from the bay region. Since we realized that we would remain incarcerated for the duration of the war, we settled into the daily routine of living, coping as best we could with inclement weather, work schedules, mess hours, and devising what leisure activities we could. I taught English and Latin in the Topaz High School during the day, and Basic English to adult learners, while supervising the Basic English Department, in the evening. I was later transferred to the camp public library, which led me into a long time career as an academic librarian.

An "indefinite leave" program was started by which the residents, after proper clearance by the government and assurance of a job "outside", could leave the camp and settle in a city in non-strategic areas. Also, by 1943, the Army decided to recruit an all Japanese-American combat team. So it was this much-decorated, il-

lustrious 442nd regimental Combat Team, composed of men from Hawaii and of men out of the concentration camps, helped to change hostile attitudes towards us. With a 300 percent of turnover in its ranks, one can only guess at the sacrifice of lives and disabilities. In our own camp, there were many Bronze Star and Purple Heart mothers.

Eventually the Supreme Court ruled that citizens whose loyalty had been established could not be held in the camps. The Army then rescinded the exclusion order.

So the camps began to close down. As each resident left, he was given his train fare and \$25.00 for expenses along the way. As the blocks became empty gradually, mess-halls were consolidated, and I found myself walking several blocks away for meals, feeling like an utter stranger in a dining room not in my own block. Most of my family had relocated to Cincinnati by the time our camp closed, but Father, Mother, my youngest brother Lee, my son and I remained until the end of October, 1945. How often in those weeks, at night, as I looked out at the darkened windows of the neighboring barracks, I would think of the strange events that had brought us to a desolate place like this, of people I would never see again, and wonder what lay ahead in time for us. When we were first interned at Tanforan, my son had been five months old, and now as we were about to leave Topaz, he was just past his fourth birthday. He had never seen a concrete building, or a regular house, a garden, a park, a bush in bloom, different people. So when we settled in Cincinnati, I saw through his eyes, the fresh sight of a wondering child, the outside world from his perspective and marveled at the glory of freedom.